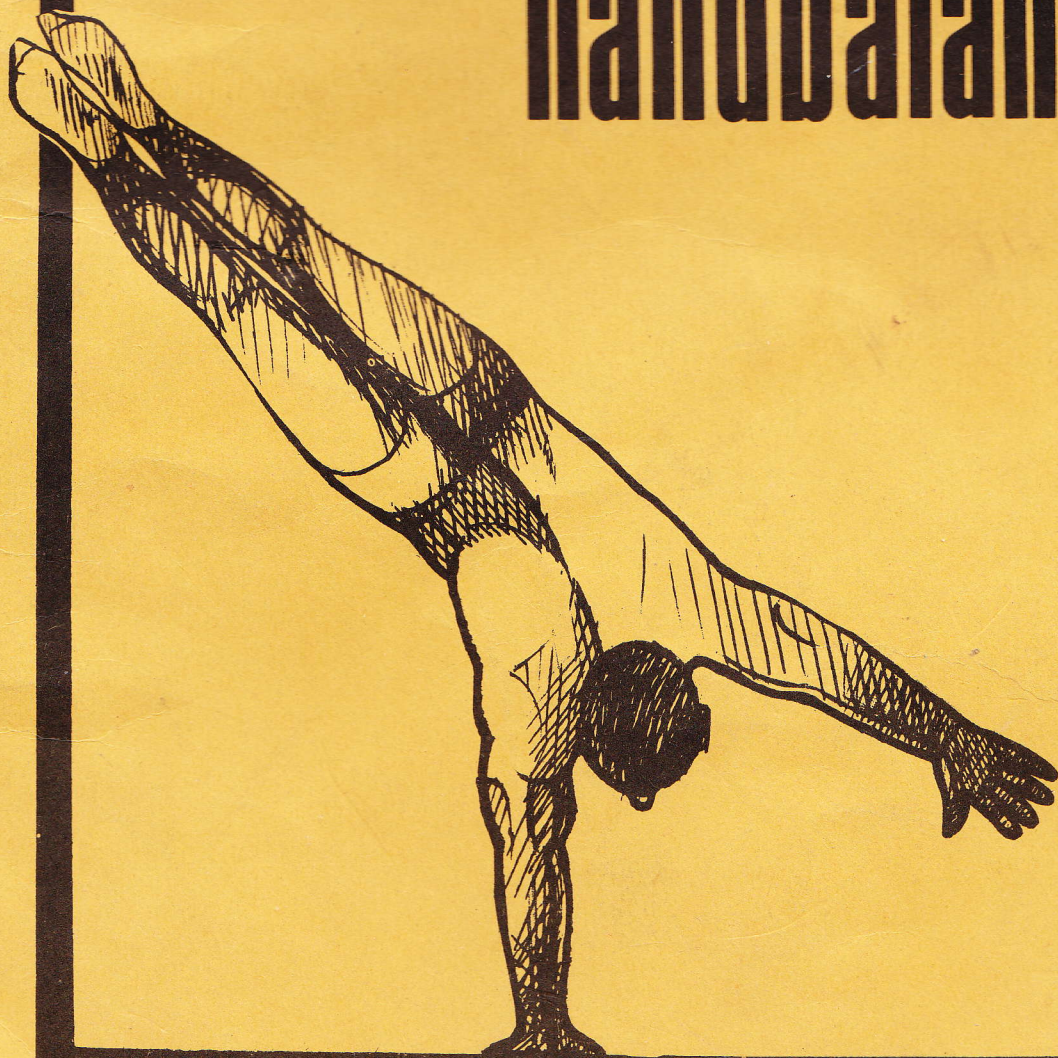


handbalancing



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FOREWORD

Every boy has marvelled at the circus acrobat. To see a man spinning through the air, twisting, jumping, balancing in a variety of attitudes; moving almost faster than the eye can follow, is among one of the most exciting human sights a youngster can experience.

But handbalancing has a special place. What boy has not marvelled with 'wide eyed' disbelief at the muscular athlete, curling up into a controlled handbalance, then perhaps dipping slowly so that his chest touches the floor, followed by a slow press-up to regain the powerful two hand balance. Then the pause — long seconds falling away. The bodyweight shifts to one side so that all the weight is over one arm, and then the 'free' limb slowly raises to show the athlete poised solidly on one arm. *The single arm handstand!* The author well remembers watching handbalancing on television in his youth. Hardly able to contain himself, he would breathlessly watch the performance and then at its conclusion (bubbling over with re-motivated enthusiasm) he would rush out to the backyard and practice throwing himself up against the wall, time after time, over and over, until pain-ridden aching arms, failing light, or his mother's call at supper time brought him unwillingly back into the confines of the home.

At times his admiration for the physical perfection and skill of these circus and stage performers almost overwhelmed him with super respect and an all encompassing admiration. He wanted desperately to be like them — a fetish — a boyhood dream

In retrospect of his boyhood the author recalls stealing candles from the kitchen cupboard, and sneaking up to the attic during the cold winter nights to practice his art, hardly daring to breathe for fear of waking the family. Toppling and twisting in the repeated frustration of not being able to 'hold' the balance. Cursing in the night at awkward falls that could bring his secret workouts to the attention of his nonunderstanding family.

But where was the harm? In spite of his parents outright condemnation of anything even vaguely strenuous that brought so much as a flush of blood to his face or beads of sweat to form on his brow, he persevered, and mastered what to others may have seemed silly, but to him, a joy and accomplishment bigger than the whole world

Bob Kennedy

Step One

In order to insure for yourself the best possible results you must walk before you can run. Or in our case, you must strengthen the wrists and arms before you can hope to support and adjust the whole of your body-weight on them. One of the finest methods that we know of doing this can be seen in illustration 1. Called the 'crouch balance', it is performed in the following way. On crouching down great care is taken in placing the hands correctly on the floor at about one foot in front of your knees. The hands are positioned with fingers splayed out, the index finger pointing directly ahead. See illustration 2. The value of this splayed position will be recognized later for its help in maintaining balance. The inner thigh is braced against the elbows thereby enabling the whole of the body to be lent forward, taking the full weight on the wrists and hands.

Illustration 1 (the crouch balance)



Illustration 2 (the splayed hand)



This exercise should be done slowly, holding the position for as long as possible, for a few minutes each day. Special care must be paid to the head position which should be forward and upward stretching the neck to its limit.

Another good exercise to increase wrist flexibility and strength is one which can be done at odd times during the day. It is simply than of clenching and unclenching the fists. This can be done without anything in the hands, or if preferred, a soft rubber ball can be used.

As this initial week of your first exercise progresses, you should begin to feel the results of your crouch balance movements. Your arms will gain strength and you will slowly find that you can maintain the balance position for longer periods without undue strain.

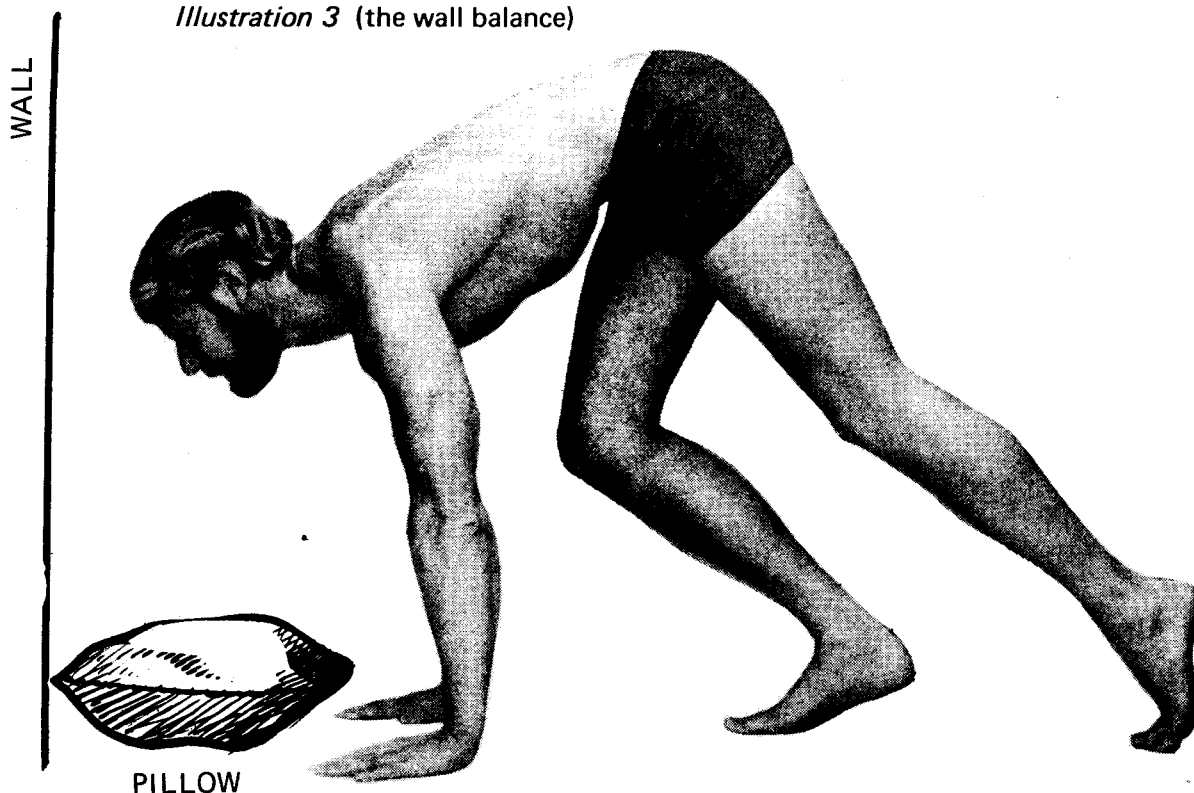
Step Two

You are now ready to perform your first handstand. This will be attempted against a wall.

1. Place your hands 18 inches from the wall at shoulder width.
2. Splay fingers as in exercise 1, all fingers very slightly bent, keeping your left leg straight and your right leg bent under. (see illustration 3)
3. Raise your head as far as possible and move your shoulders forward, so that the weight is taken from your legs and transferred over the arms.

The head position is most important as you must bring your centre of gravity to a point level with your shoulder. Pushing yourself forward from the left leg, the body now feels off balance and in order to rebalance, you will find that the legs must be raised in the air. This complete movement must be performed with enough speed to ensure that your legs go high enough so that they will fall forward and rest on the wall. This exercise again must be performed thirty to fifty times a day in order that you should become experienced in supporting your own body weight on your arms. This depends course on how well-equipped you feel yourself to do it. As a safety measure a cushion or pillow should be placed slightly forward and in front of the head on the ground between the hands and the wall, so that should you lose your balance in the initial stages and fall, no harm will result. See illustration 3.

Illustration 3 (the wall balance)



It must be emphasized that if your arms are, for any reason, weak, care should be taken not to overdo the exercise. Needless to say, Step-by-Step Unlimited can take no responsibility for any injury incurred directly or indirectly as a result of the methods advocated in this course.

Step Three

You are now in the position required to teach yourself the art of balance, and the way to do this is as follows: When in the handstand position, ease your legs slightly back so that only the toes are resting against the wall. You will find that even this simple movement will require a readjustment of position and push from the arms and hands. It is this ability to rebalance through the strength of the arm and wrist muscles that you must become familiar with. Now try taking one foot completely off the wall but at the same time keeping the knee locked so as to retain the outstretched position. You now have only one toe against the wall and through practice and the slow gaining of confidence, you'll find that this too can be pushed from the wall for a brief second. If you are a complete novice, you will undoubtedly find yourself losing balance and falling either to the left or right or falling backwards so that you arrive in the starting position. If you find yourself twisting to one side or the other, try to maintain balance by putting extra strength into your hands and wrists by putting extra pressure on the floor, bracing the hands harder through muscular contraction. If you must fall, try and control your descent, so as to lessen impact. After a few days practice at this (time depending on the amount of natural aptitude and practice) you will be ready for the next step.

Step Four

Your next step is literally one step. Take a short step backwards from the wall. Now each time that you kick up with your legs into the handstand position, you must try your best to arrive at *and hold* the point of balance. You will find that if you are not kicking hard enough from the ground, your legs will merely fall back. If you over kick, you will arrive at and pass your balance point far too quickly to be able to hold that position, and your feet will rest on the wall. By this time your arms and wrists should be strong enough to withstand this position of being off balance without giving way, but should they, you will again of course have the pillow or cushion there to save what now becomes your shoulders and lower back, from injury. Only time is your next enemy, for time alone will enable you to reach the skill and confidence required to hold that perfect balance condition.

Step Five

The free handstand

When you feel that you can dispense with the wall, find an area of open ground, again use your safety pillow, and practice the true unaided handstand. The one thing now that you must plan for is, that you may well fall completely forward, for now you have no wall on which to save yourself. When this happens, the best way to prevent an uncoordinated fall is to take one hand away (usually weakest) as quickly as possible. You will find that by doing this, the body will twist to that side and be in a position to meet the floor with feet together in a controlled way. With time and practice, you will soon be ready for more experimentation with balance. There are various things that you can now perform in order that you should get a thorough grounding in holding that balance. As you come down from a handstand position, you will find that by bending the elbows a little, your body is momentarily checked before the feet come to the floor. Do not bend the elbows too much or you will have difficulty in straightening them out, unless of course you are very strong. This little exercise will teach you to check what is known as *underbalance*, something you must learn before being able to perform a good free balance. It is far more difficult to check underbalance than overbalance, so don't hesitate spending some time at this.

Overbalance

It is now that you will reap the harvest of earlier practice, for it is by pressure on the fingers that overbalance is checked. Remember hands splayed, fingers slightly bent. Practice this regularly by deliberately pushing the legs forward to a slight overbalance position. If, in doing this, the worst comes to the worst, (you begin to fall forward), you can always move one hand a few inches forward (as you would if learning how to walk on your hands) although this is not recommended, for the perfect handstand should be executed with *no movements* of the hand along the floor. Beware of learning bad habits, so don't make any forward movement with your hands unless necessary to save a fall.

Overbalance to the side

Another thing you will find happening is that you may well overbalance and tend to fall to either one side or the other. The answer to this problem is to exert pressure on the little finger of the respective hand thereby bringing the legs back into balance. You may find that you have done this already, instinctively, but nevertheless, at times, allow your legs to fall slightly to the side and practice the movement as it is all good for general control.

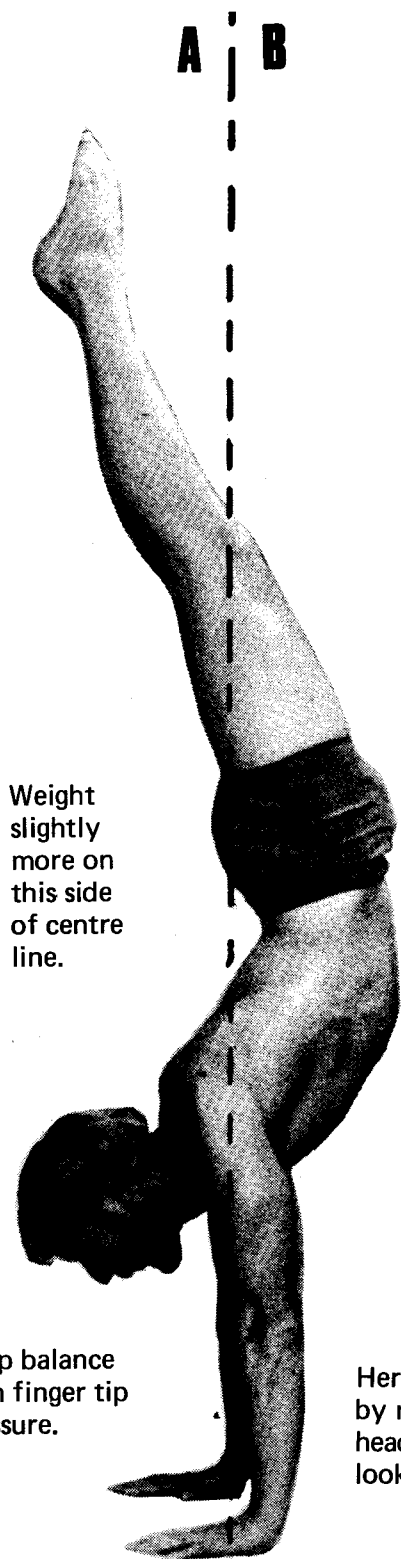
A point of interest on this question of balance is that many naturally assume that pressure on the heel of the hand would check underbalance, (see illustration 2) unfortunately, however, this is physically impossible, it being necessary to move the entire body back into the plane of the centre of gravity by bending the elbows and straightening them. After a time you should have no difficulty in going into something of a vertical handstand if, you have mastered the preceding steps outlined in this course. Indeed, you should now be in a position to correct slight overbalance and underbalance, and slight degrees of side movement. On the occasions when our outlined methods fail as a result of your kicking too hard, either tuck the head between the shoulders and go into a simple forward roll, or lift one hand off the floor, and take a step forward. Learn to do one or the other to use *only* in emergencies, as a fall flat on the back is both teeth jarring and disconcerting and, should you miss your safety pillow, discouraging.

Some points on balance

There will be those who discover that they can regain their balance by movement of their legs. To those, I would say, ideally the last leg to leave the floor should be brought up to the vertical position along side the first. During your initial attempts, you must try to keep the legs together. Although you will find that it is possible to maintain a degree of balance by leg movement, *avoid this*. The legs are not to be used to maintain balance. Remember, it is only through the pressure of the fingers against the floor that the perfect balance (holding the center of gravity) is kept.

Step Six

You will notice that in illustration 4 a dotted line has been drawn approximately through the centre of the figure. This line represents the center of gravity mentioned earlier. The center of gravity, although theoretical, becomes a *very real* point in practice, and study of our diagram should help you discover its approximate position. It's purpose here is to show you, when in a perfect balance, the amount of weight on each side of the line is equal, almost, but not quite, there is slightly more bodyweight on the A side of the line than the B side. This is the overbalance position that was mentioned. Normally the body would fall in the direction of A, but the pressure on the finger tips must be great enough to prevent this from happening, but not enough to thrust the body back past the line of the B side. You can, through practice, maintain this state with little or no use of the finger tips and it is this aim that you should set yourself. Practice does indeed make perfect and a short time spent each day would soon show remarkable improvement.



Weight slightly more on this side of centre line.

Keep balance with finger tip pressure.

Illustration 4



C D

Illustration 5

Here, Robert Kennedy poses the natural back arch, claimed by many as the perfect hand stand position. Incidentally, the head as held in Illustration C is quite difficult, and must be looked upon as an advanced position.

Elementary balance must be practised until such time as you can keep the body, from shoulders to feet, *rigid*. Once you can do this, the amount of muscular effort required to hold balance is greatly reduced. Reaching the point where you can concentrate entirely on fingertip pressure should be your next goal and all practice should be to this end.

To sum up what we have just learned

The body is kept in a state of balance by means of the overbalance being kept in check by fingertip pressure. Underbalance is corrected by bending the elbows and strengthening them to regain the proper position. Always avoid walking forward on the hands, except in emergencies, for apart from being far from neat, it ultimately gets the would-be-balancer into bad habits which are later hard to correct. *Remember, practice makes perfect, a bad habit practiced enough would make that error perfect. That is why it is so important to practice whatever you do correctly from the very beginning.* Control your enthusiasm to progress as fast as possible, but bear in mind what has been said. Forcing the pace can lead to bad balancing habits and even failure. This is why so much time has been taken over the elementary stages of handbalancing.

Step Seven

Variety

You are now in a position to bring a little variety into your balancing practice. Don't be afraid of forsaking your front lawn and trying your handstands on firmer ground or a soft rug perhaps. Or, if you have the facilities, sand, which is very good, because of its softness, in strengthening the fingers, and aiding your progress to the perfect handstand.

Step Eight

The perfect handstand

Just what does the perfect handstand look like? It would seem that each of the many expert handbalancers hold a different opinion on this. Some insist that it is *only* perfect when the normal back arch (the amount of back hollow a person would have in standing erect) is shown in the handstand position. (See illustration 5.) Others prefer a very deep arch in the claim that it looks more graceful. General consensus of opinion, however, is that the former, with the normal arch and more erect position, is more desirable and accepted as the most perfect stance of the two. It is toward this position that we suggest you plan your practice.

Step Nine

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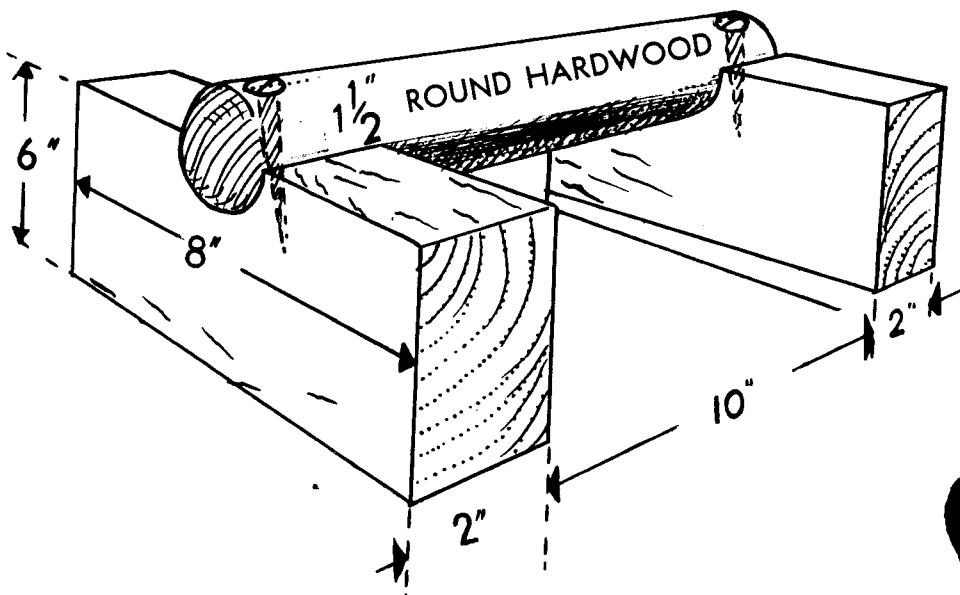
The handstand press-up

Once you have learned the kick-up handstand, and have mastered it fairly well, the handstand press-up is your next objective, for if you are to achieve the prized one hand handstand, you must start exercising for still more control and strength. The handstand press-up is performed in the following way. Again find that wall, and go into the earlier learned wall handstand, and *don't* forget that cushion. It should be placed directly under the head, for safety reasons. Slowly bend your arms and allow your head to sink to the pillow, this in itself is not too difficult. The next stage most people find much harder, for you must straighten your arms until fully extended. If you find that this is not too difficult, try 2 or 3 more but aim at performing 15 to 20 a day. They need not necessarily be performed at one time. The benefit of this exercise is enormous. From the fingers to the upper arms, (triceps) and shoulders, new strength is gained, strength that you need to achieve success in the next step.

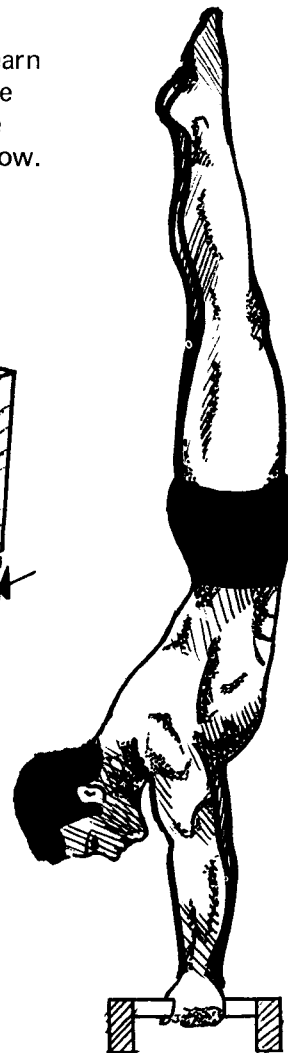
Floor parallel bars

Many people learning to handbalance find that they can more easily learn this skill by practicing from the start on what is generally known as the floor parallel bars. We have illustrated how these can be made at home using the minimum amount of materials and thus keeping your costs low. (See illustration 6.)

Illustration 6 (how to construct floor parallel bars)



Make two of the above floor parallel bars.



The floor parallel bars are especially useful to the individual who has suffered pain or difficulty in trying to balance with his hands flat on the floor. Every rule that we have previously described can be applied equally as well when the floor bars are used to aid the beginner in learning how to handstand. For some to, it is easier to execute their first floor press-ups on floor parallel bars, then later, on the ground. The reason why some find it is easier to press-up on the bars is because, in gripping the floor bars the strength of the forearms can be better brought into play. Additionally you may find that better control can be practiced when using these floor bars when the time comes for you to learn the single arm handstand.

Step ten

Learning the one handed handstand

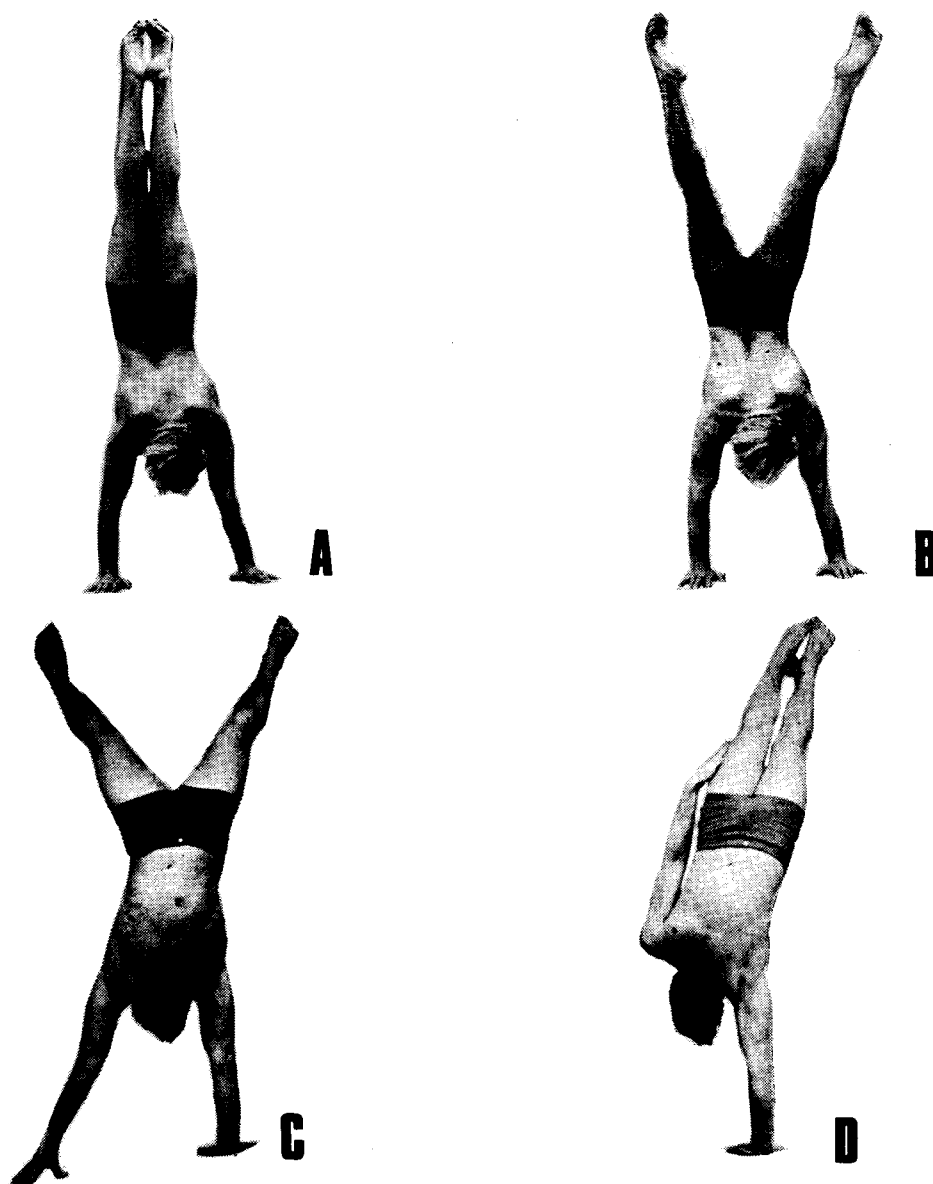
Obtaining the ultimate

Once you have acquired the ability to kick-up into a two hand handstand, and hold this position, practice constantly, and even go so far as to time yourself seeing how long you can hold the regular handstand position. Don't be too optimistic. For every 100 persons who can perform a perfect handstand there is only one who will be able to perform a perfect 'one hand stand'. If you are to be that person, you must be prepared to practice regularly and conscientiously and not to give up, even if it seems difficult at first. The 'one hand stand' is the mark of the finished balancer and when you can do it gracefully with complete confidence you are one of the chosen few.

The accepted method of attaining the one handed handstand is to go up into your regular handstand, gain complete control and slowly part the legs until they reach the ten past ten position of the clock. Then slowly move the body-weight over to your strongest side (usually the right) until that arm is virtually taking all the stress. Your weaker arm will still be in contact with the floor or bar but it will be employed as a means as keeping a balance rather than maintaining the body-weight. Practice balancing in this way so that your strongest arm can get used to maintain 95% of your body-weight. Gradually you will be able to do away with all contact with your weaker arm and use it solely as a balancing aid. At times, this arm will have to return to a point of contact if you find that you are losing the one arm stance.

There are four diagrams showing the position to strive for in learning the one handed handstand. (see illustration 7) Study them carefully. Take particular notice of the free arm in Figure D. This arm, used as an aid, should ultimately be well clear of the ground. There are in fact a few handbalancers of the highest calibre who are able to place their hand and arm along the side of their body so as to be entirely balanced at one point.

Illustration 7 (the final steps)



Difficulties you may encounter

One major fault most beginners have when learning the one handed handstand, is that after carefully leaning to one side and reaching the point where only the fingertips touch the floor, they are in too much of a hurry to lift the entire arm. When you lift this free arm quickly, compensation can not be made fast enough for the sudden change in the centre of gravity, resulting in failure. Taking more time and care in lifting this arm from the floor is possibly the most important phase of the one handed handstand.

* * * * *

To conclude, it should be reiterated that you must be content to progress slowly. Motivate yourself **now**. Decide that you *are* going to learn balancing. It can be fun, and you will get a sense of accomplishment once you have mastered the various techniques.

The learning of handbalancing can be compared to learning how to ride a bicycle. Both involve practice and patience at first and here is the secret. *Spread your enthusiasm over several weeks*. Better to practice two minutes each day for a month than to spend a frustrating hour trying to learn the art 'overnight'. Be positive. Practice regularly and you will master the art of balancing. Have fun and don't give up until that special day when during a balance, you slowly remove one hand from the floor . . . and hold that prized position — the one arm handstand!

